

## The Political Philosophy of Toy Story 3

[**SPOILER WARNING:** This is pretty much all spoilers, so please see the movie before reading. It's a really, really good movie — probably the best Disney film. So you should totally see it. First.]

**UPDATE:** I missed a bunch the first time I saw the movie; this version has been amended to include the subthemes about immigration and socialization.

The film begins with Woody trying to defend a crumbling system of communism (presumably the Soviet Union). Toys have a duty to their owners, he argues. The owner is a personified totalitarian state (Stalin?) — he decides what the toys do and the toys are not permitted to escape. For some reason (false consciousness?), the other toys instinctively agree with this but find the notion hard to sustain when their owner makes clear he doesn't want them anymore (massive unemployment).

The last straw is when, through a comic mishap, they get the misimpression their owner is trying to throw them away. They feel this existential threat releases them from their duty of loyalty.<sup>1</sup> The state's one duty to its citizens is to keep them alive; if it can't do that, the system falls apart. Note, however, that it's only the misimpression that removes the duty. When they learn (from Mrs. Potato Head) that they were mistaken and Andy only planned to put them in the attic, they rush to return to him. The attic won't actually kill them and so doesn't remove the duty.

Communism having collapsed, the toys emigrate to Sunnyside (the US, that nation of immigrants), which leader Lotso depicts as a libertarian paradise. In his introductory speech, he touts the joys of self-ownership and interacting with children through the market (new children are constantly replacing old ones, maximizing the efficiency of the toys), as well as the improved material comforts his system brings (the repair depot, the dream house). The toys are enchanted.

However, they quickly realize libertarian paradise is actually a far worse nightmare than communism. Lotso explains that immigrants have to work their way up, starting by doing the painful, backbreaking jobs that the current population (all former immigrants themselves) won't do. There are a couple exceptions: Barbie is taken as a (Russian) mail-order bride and the entrepreneurial Buzz is chosen for promotion to the managerial class and resocialized so he won't sympathize with his old comrades.<sup>2</sup>

Sunnyside's supposed freedom is actually slavery, complete with military discipline (via the reset Buzz) and a panopticon prison (via the monkey and symbolized by the treehouse). Their days are spent in torturous labor from which there is no real escape. Lotso has used his freedom to accumulate all the power for himself and does not allow any for anyone else.

Meanwhile, Woody is adopted by Bonnie's benevolent dictatorship. People are given a second chance there — they can adopt new names, new identities, and spend their days doing improv. They do work under Bonnie's direction, but they do so voluntarily, and are free to leave if she becomes a tyrant. As Andy makes clear at the end of the film, it is Bonnie who owes a duty to the toys, not vice versa.

Back at Sunnyside, the toys overthrow Lotso's capitalist domination by working together, harnessing the collective power of the working class and using the managerial class (i.e. Ken and Bookworm) against itself (via deception and torture!). But their success eventually persuades some members of the managerial class to become their allies (e.g. Ken, despite having been tortured<sup>3</sup>, and ultimately Lotso's right-hand toy, Big Baby) and at a key moment they together overthrow the capitalist Lotso, as Barbie gives a rousing speech nailing the key flaw with libertarianism: "authority should derive from the consent of the governed, not the threat of force."

However, the new revolutionaries also leave, preventing them from installing themselves as a new dictatorship of the proletariat. And in a final act betraying that he is finally beginning to question communism, Woody asks Andy (surely his first request of the state in his entire life!) that his comrades be given to Bonnie. Andy agrees, and takes the extra step of giving Woody to Bonnie as well, finally dissolving his duties to the state.

Meanwhile, Ken and Barbie now lead Sunnyside, making it a "fun and groovy" socialist utopia. (Its actual day-to-day operation is, of course, left vague, but there is apparently lots of dancing in the streets.) Having risen up and overthrown Lotso, the toys can now operate on the basis of mutual equality. A happy ending for everyone.

The same seems to apply to the Green Army Men who leave earlier, but only because they (pretty reasonably) believe they're going to get thrown away even when other toys just go to the attic. ■

Very *Street Corner Society*, so another possible reading is that they're fleeing fascist Italy. ■

Perhaps Ken realizes that he will get to lead a Lotso-less Sunnyside? ■

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